

PROSPECTS FOR PEACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST: THE VIEW FROM ISRAEL

Presentations made at a conference
held under the auspices of the
Council on Foreign Relations
in cooperation with
The Dayan Center for Middle Eastern
and African Studies, Tel Aviv University
September 13, 1984



COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS, INC.
58 East 68 Street, New York, NY 10021

THE IMPACT OF RESURGENT ISLAM ON THE REGION

Speaker: Martin Kramer

Perhaps it is in the nature of resurgent Islam that just when people think they have reached some kind of an understanding, something comes up or erupts on the scene which lays waste to some of the best laid plans of statesmen, diplomats and strategists. In the five years after the Iranian revolution, we have seen the seizure of the Great Mosque in Mecca and the assassination of Anwar Sadat, the Muslim Brotherhood rebellion in Syria, and the Shi'ite self-detonations in Lebanon. These are all the punctuation marks of violence and a statement on profound social change which has been made by resurgent Islam. We are dealing here with subterranean currents and with a specific form of expression which is characteristic of this form of resurgence. Resurgent Islam has not spent itself; more of its effects will be seen. We may even be surprised again -- probably not in quite as big a way as in 1979 -- but the potential is still there. Whatever happens -- whether or not we are surprised, whether or not there are some unforeseen developments which cloud the political and diplomatic scene -- the options for peace have already been narrowed, perhaps even considerably, by a fear of resurgent Islam, both in the Arab world and in Israel.

There is an apprehension, born of a realistic sense throughout the region, that Islam has not yet spent itself; that it may yet claim another regime in the region; that it may yet claim the life of another head of state; or that it may yet terrorize a great power into retreat. In short, resurgent Islam is already accepted as a given. It is something that figures now in calculations, especially in the calculations of domestic repercussions of diplomatic and political developments. The reason that it is taken into consideration is that it has become the foremost form of ideological resentment against domestic oppression and foreign domination in the region. To a large extent it has replaced the Arab nationalism of the 1950s and 1960s. This is not a phenomenon which is easily assessed. Many of the developments have occurred just beyond the horizon, just beyond our view, in the popular quarters, in the minds of the masses. Journalists and diplomats write backgrounders on this kind of subject. It figures very little in the cable traffic, even less in some of the day-to-day reporting coming out of the Middle East -- except, of course, when it bursts onto the foreground. The obvious problems of analysis are those of interpretation. Underestimation and overestimation are the two principal problems and both of them feed on the same major problem -- the dearth of reliable information. We do know something about the way it works, on what it feeds, and the way it expresses itself, and

there's already a vast Western literature of explication, but it still is difficult to fathom fully Muslim activism or to empathize with Muslim expressions of commitment.

Some of the items appearing in the Iranian press on a regular basis are the last testaments of various Iranian soldiers and soldier Mullahs who've been killed in the war. They are very moving, but in some ways profoundly perplexing. The following is a citation from one which is representative: "My dear wife, I asked you to be honored if I achieve my wish, which is martyrdom so the enemy would know that the Muslim nation of Iran devotes their dearest ones in order to obtain their sublime goal. My dear wife, I request you to tell our son that if his father did not smile upon him, and if he was deprived of fatherly compassion and love, the leader of the revolution of the Islamic republic will do so and will fill your heart with fatherly feelings and sentiments." Two elements here defy understanding -- the professed desire for martyrdom and the absolute faith in the powers of consolation of Khomeini. Even if this total commitment is beyond our empathy, it is still possible to identify its recurrent themes and to map its impact.

What is the impact? First, in many countries the tide of resurgent Islam has been stemmed. One must remember the atmosphere in late 1979 and early 1980 when it was widely believed that through imitation there might be further revolutions in the Muslim world. There have been no revolutions by emulation. If Iran believed at the time that simply by pure example it could inspire a vicarious movement of sympathy sweeping through the Muslim world, it was wrong. On the other hand, and differently from those first two years after the revolution, Iran is now actively exporting its revolution through agencies that are only now coming to light. This is a major development, involving the Iranian foreign office, government ministries, leading clerics, various emigres who are now based in Iran, and numerous volunteers. Iran is asking itself the question that perhaps every revolution that has a universal message must ask itself: Is Islam possible in one country? Can the Islamic revolution survive isolated and alone?

Khomeini's answer to this question has been an emphatic "no." In Iran they openly speak of exporting the revolution, and they covertly work to do so. Not since Abdel Nasser's day has there been any Middle Eastern state which has believed itself to have so broad a license to interfere in the affairs of others. The impact of this attempt to export the revolution has been very uneven, and it has had repercussions that even the Iranians themselves did not expect. Even when one takes into account the unevenness of the impact, there is no doubt that the greatest impression has been made upon Shi'ites, particularly those who live in Lebanon and in the Arab Gulf States. Iran does not necessarily regard them from a sectarian point of view, but rather from a strategic point of view, as the vanguard of the revolution.

Iran of course makes no differentiation between Sunnis and Shi'ites in its formal ideological profession of the faith. What it does say, however, is that the Shi'ites may be, because of the nature of their

belief, at a higher level of consciousness and awareness. They will stand at the vanguard. The others -- that is, the wider Sunni world -- will eventually reach that comparable stage only after a more prolonged process. Most of the activities which I have followed and which have come to the attention of the wider world -- be they the attempted coup in Bahrain in 1981 or the activities of the Shi'ites in the Baalbek, or the bombings in Kuwait late last year -- all these are examples of Iranian activities, or reflections of Iranian activities among various Shi'ite communities.

I would say that the overall prospects for this kind of intervention depend to a great extent on the deadlocked Iran-Iraq war. Since no one is in a position today to say how that war will resolve itself, it is difficult to make any final judgement as to the prospects of resurgent Islam in the Gulf, in Lebanon and in other Shi'ite areas. If a succession struggle develops soon, Iran's star will find itself in rapid descent. On the other hand, if there is some unexpected change in Iran's favor in the Iran-Iraq war we may see many Muslims -- in the Gulf especially, but also elsewhere -- come down off their fences. If this is the case, we would see more than the isolated terrorism that we have seen so far -- possibly even a concerted bid for power. A Persian Gulf crisis -- and it takes no imagination at this point to imagine one -- could send Islam stock soaring once again and Islamic resurgence could then receive that second wind about which there has been such a question mark since 1979.

How has all this affected the prospects for peace in the Middle East? First of all, it is important to note that Israel's present and potential partners for peace have almost all faced some form of Muslim opposition, including terrorism, insurrection, rebellion and assassination. It is difficult to get a reading on the general mood in the wake of these events, but a brief survey is in place, beginning with Egypt. The rise of religious movements in the 1970s, especially the extremist movements which were responsible for Sadat's assassination, are well known. Mubarak, while repressing the more extreme groups, has undoubtedly gone out of his way to conciliate the mainstream fundamentalists. Of course, they are not interested in peace on the terms which were negotiated at Camp David. Indeed, they are not interested in peace on any terms short of Israel's utter emasculation or destruction.

As for Syria, in the early 1980s the Muslim Brotherhood launched a concerted effort to bring the regime to its knees -- a campaign which reached its apex in the Hamah uprising of early 1982. This was the most serious domestic challenge posed to the rule of Hafiz Assad. It was suppressed quite ruthlessly and has since been forgotten. Since then, however, while standing firm on his secular principles, Assad has moved to bolster his Muslim credentials -- particularly his Shi'ite credentials -- at least in part by becoming the closest Middle Eastern ally of the Islamic Republic of Iran. This results in a curious paradox: a secular Arab nationalist state closely allied with the foremost exponent of Islamic clericalism and fundamentalism in the Middle East! There are, of course, other reasons for his actions -- the Iran-Iraq war is but one --

but the regime in Syria has used this affiliation with Iran to bolster its credentials, and there is a relationship between that and the posture which Syria has taken in the conflict.

With the rise of the Lebanese Shi'ites to demographic preeminence and their political awakening, Lebanon today is the most fertile ground in the Middle East for the transportation of Khomeini's neo-Shi'ism and Iranian-style fundamentalism. What has transpired on Israel's northern border is really quite remarkable. It has been a complete surprise. It was not anticipated that the Shi'ites of Lebanon may as a consequence of both American actions and of the various social and migratory trends, come to hold the veto power over Lebanon's policy towards Israel. This is a veto power which, it can be argued, they have already exercised once.

Only Jordan has remained unshaken, but at a price. The Muslim Brotherhood is allowed to operate freely in Jordan, but Hussein shows a caution towards them bordering on deference. The Saudis, needless to say, are wary; they too have covered their bases. At the time they were promoting the Fahd peace plan, they were also making noises in the direction of Jihad , about which a formal resolution emanated from a summit conference held in Saudi Arabia in 1981. These are both sides of a wavering policy which the Saudis have been pursuing vis-a-vis Islam and their standing in the Muslim world. Recent signs indicate that Saudi Arabia is interested in once again coming into the fold -- certainly to be in Iran's good graces. This came to the fore in the most recent pilgrimage season just concluded.

Needless to say, those in Israel who are open to persuasion are still profoundly apprehensive about the events that they see around them. They believe that resurgent Islam affects the Arab willingness to talk and the long-term viability of peace. It is one thing to be surrounded by a Muslim sea -- but when the sea is turbulent, that apprehension grows still greater and there is an inclination to drop even more anchors. There is no sense in Israel that Israel or the Arab-Israeli conflict is in any way responsible for this phenomenon, and it is argued there that one cannot attribute the events in Iran to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Certainly the events in Iran were paramount in bringing Muslim fundamentalism to the fore in the Middle East. In conclusion, the resurgence of Islam has had the effect of reducing the political courage -- both Arab and Israeli -- without which peace is an impossibility in the Middle East. As a consequence, the eye of the needle through which any peace initiative must pass has grown considerably smaller.